

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that there be a period for the transaction of routine morning business with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from West Virginia is recognized.

WHEN WILL THE CYCLE OF
SCHOOL VIOLENCE END?

Mr. BYRD. Mr. President, the nightmare of violence in our nation's schools has grabbed our attention once more. This morning, a first-grade student was shot and killed by another first-grader at a Michigan elementary school. Our thoughts and prayers are with the young girl's family, with the young person who pulled the trigger, and with the twenty other students in the classroom. Tragically, once again, the notion of schools as a safe haven was shattered by the sound of gunfire, and we must now begin to face the formidable challenge of rebuilding that serene and tranquil school environment that each and every student and teacher deserves.

This tragedy begs some very basic questions of our society.

First, and perhaps most importantly, what is a first-grader doing with a loaded gun? A first-grader is six years old, maybe even seven. These are merely babes with sweet young faces who have barely begun their lives. They are still putting baby teeth under their pillows awaiting a visit from the tooth fairy. How did this child get the weapon? And what on Earth possessed the child to bring it to school?

What has gone so wrong in our nation that students feel the need to bring weapons to the public school classroom? Do they think they have to show off for their friends? Do they feel the need for power? Surely not a child in the first grade. Do they think that carrying a weapon to school gives them greater stature? I know that we, as a nation, have been struggling with these questions for many, many months, but it is time we started to reach some conclusions.

In the 315 days since the tragedy at Columbine High School, the violence has not stopped. We have seen the same tragic scene of students and teachers pouring out of schools in fear in Atlanta. In the District of Columbia, since this school year began in September, 15 public school students have been killed. According to police, eight of the fifteen slayings were precipitated by an argument in school and ended in gunfire on a neighborhood street. For some reason that we cannot seem to get our arms around, our children continue to injure and kill one another.

Why in the world are we not concentrating on this? Why is the Juvenile

Justice bill, which passed this Senate in May with common-sense weapons controls, still stalled? How many children have to die before this Congress sits up and takes notice? How many lives, so full of potential, have to be snuffed out: 15, 30, 50, 100?

We need to find out why these tragedies continue to occur, and we need to find ways to stop it.

There will be a supplemental bill coming before this Senate soon which is intended to provide close to a billion dollars in aid for Colombia. The White House calls this funding an emergency. I think we have more than enough emergencies here on our home soil that demand urgent attention. It is time to get our priorities straight.

I understand that this is not something that Congress can do on its own, nor is it something that a local school board can accomplish by itself. Putting an end to school violence will take a concerted effort—from lawmakers to parents to students to clergy to community leaders. No one can be given a pass. We all share a responsibility to come together, to look past any historical differences, and to work to find real solutions that will put an end to these tragedies.

I only pray that we can.

My heart goes out to the family who must be stunned at the loss of their little girl. I can only imagine their suffering. All the potential in one tiny, small, little innocent life has been stolen in the flash of a gun. I hope that this Congress, and I hope that the electronic media, the Hollywood movie stars, the movie industry, and the whole Nation, will finally commit to taking the difficult steps that are needed to make sure something positive can come from such an incredible tragedy.

I yield the floor.

KEEP OUR PROMISE TO
AMERICA'S MILITARY RETIREES

Mr. ABRAHAM. Mr. President, I join my colleagues in sponsoring, S. 2003, the Keep Our Promise to America's Military Retirees Act of 2000. I am sponsoring this legislation because I believe it is necessary if we are to fulfill our moral obligation to those who devoted their careers to safeguarding our nation's people, our homes, and our way of life.

The brave men and women of our armed forces literally put their lives on the line for this country. We owe them a debt we can never repay. But one thing we cannot do, in my opinion, is fail to live up to our explicit promise that those who made military life their career would receive, in return lifetime medical care. That is a promise we have made; and it is a promise we must keep.

There has already been a great deal of discussion on this topic in the Administration and the Congress. In the 1998 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress expressed its sense that many retired military personnel rea-

sonably believed that they had been promised lifetime health care in exchange for 20 or more years of service. Recruiters for the uniformed services, as agents of the United States government, had used recruiting tactics promising enrollees entering the Armed Forces prior to June 7, 1956, that they would be entitled to fully paid lifetime health care upon retirement.

Unfortunately, prior to 1956, a statutory health care plan did not exist for our military personnel. Since the establishment of CHAMPUS, and its successor, Tricare, we have seen the erosion of space-available health care at military treatment facilities for military retirees. Additionally, military health care has become increasingly difficult to obtain for military retirees as the Department of Defense reduces its health care infrastructure. As a result, military retiree's health care situation is woefully inadequate compared to health care afforded to other federal employees. Today, military retirees remain the only Federal Government personnel who have been prevented from using their employer-provided health care at or after 65 years of age. Military retirees deserve to have a health care program that is at least comparable with that of retirees from civilian employment in the Federal Government.

In statements before this Congress, our distinguished Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs have reiterated the importance of seeing to military retirees' health needs. According to Secretary Cohen, the loudest complaints he hears while traveling concern the military health care system.

I believe General Hugh Shelton expressed the correct response to these complaints when he stated, "I think that the first thing we need to do is make sure that we acknowledge our commitment to the retirees for their years of service and for what we basically committed to at the time they were recruited into the armed forces." It is morally imperative, that we keep our promise to the brave men and women who devoted their careers to protecting our country.

But we should also keep in mind that health care is not only a top issue for retirees; it is also a major source of dissatisfaction for active duty personnel. As such it affects readiness, recruiting and retention. The availability of quality, lifetime health care is a critical recruiting incentive for the all volunteer Armed Forces.

That incentive has been undermined by the declining services provided to military retirees. In its self-proclaimed "Year of Health Care," the Department of Defense had a major opportunity to take the lead in keeping commitments to service members and start erasing the skepticism and distrust that years of broken health care promises have engendered among the retired population. Putting these initiatives in the